

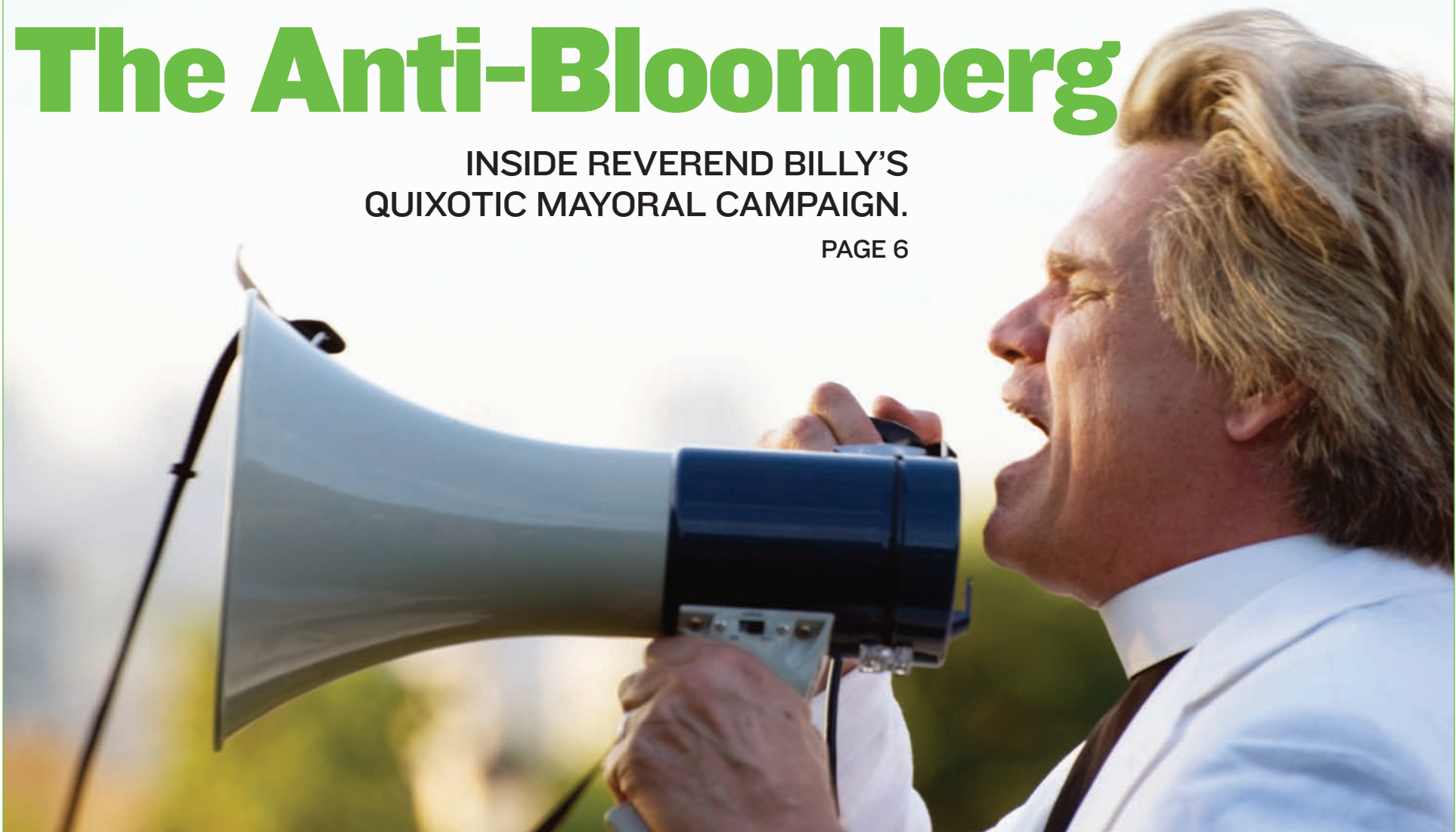
DID WOODSTOCK KILL ROCK 'N' ROLL? PAGE 10

# THE INDYPENDENT

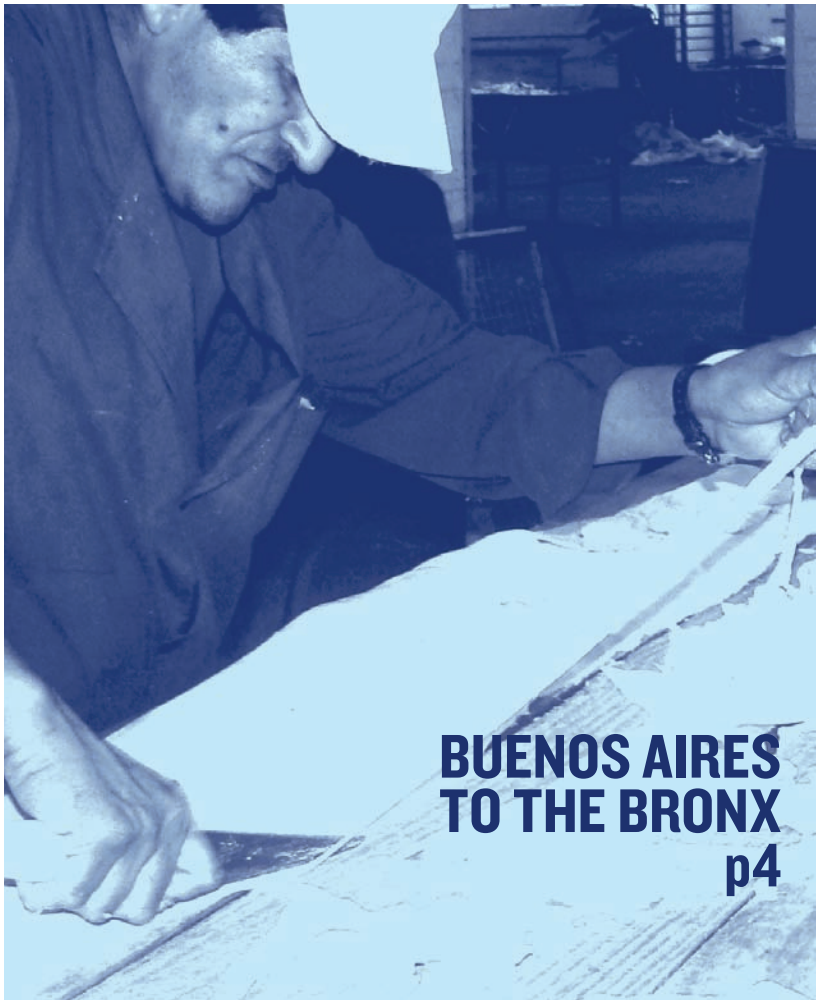
Issue #139, August 14 – September 18, 2009  
A FREE PAPER FOR FREE PEOPLE

## The Anti-Bloomberg

INSIDE REVEREND BILLY'S  
QUIXOTIC MAYORAL CAMPAIGN.  
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Mayoral candidate Reverend Billy Talen.  
PHOTO: MARK BAILEY



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OF WAR  
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A BED-STUY  
FARM UPROOTED  
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THE INDYPENDENT  
P.O. BOX 1417  
NEW YORK, NY 10276

PHONE: 212-221-0521

GENERAL INQUIRIES AND SUBMISSIONS:  
contact@indypendent.org

READER COMMENTS:  
letters@indypendent.org

SUBSCRIPTIONS:  
indypendent.org

DONATE ONLINE:  
indypendent.org/donate

NEWS TIPS:  
news@indypendent.org

ADVERTISING AND PROMOTION:  
Arun Gupta: ak Gupta@indypendent.org

GENERAL COORDINATORS:  
Jessica Lee, Elizabeth Henderson

ILLUSTRATIONS COORDINATOR:  
Frank Reynoso: freynoso@indypendent.org

DESIGNERS:  
Ryan Dunsmuir, Anna Gold

INDYKIDS: indykids@indymedia.org  
INDYVIDEO: awolf@indypendent.org  
PUBLISH YOUR NEWS: nyc.indymedia.org

*The Indypendent* is a New York-based free newspaper published 17 times a year on Fridays to our print and online readership of more than 100,000. The newspaper is a labor of love by a network of volunteers who do all of the reporting, writing, photography, illustration, editing, designing, distribution, fundraising and website management. Since 2000, more than 600 citizen journalists, artists and media activists have contributed their energy to this project. Winner of dozens of New York Community Media Alliance awards, *The Indypendent* is dedicated to empowering people to create a true alternative to the corporate press by encouraging people to produce their own media. *The Indypendent* is funded by subscriptions, donations, grants, merchandise sales, benefits and advertising from organizations with similar missions. We accept submissions that look at news and culture through a critical lens, exploring how systems of power — economic, political and social — affect the lives of ordinary people locally and globally. *The Indypendent* reserves the right to edit articles for length, content and clarity.

*The Indypendent* is the newspaper project of the New York City Independent Media Center, which is affiliated with the global Indymedia movement (indymedia.org), an international network that is dedicated to fostering grassroots media production. NYC IMC sponsors three other volunteer projects: the children's newspaper *IndyKids*, the IndyVideo news team and the NYC IMC open publishing website (nyc.indymedia.org).

#### VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTORS:

Sam Alcott, Steven Arnerich, Eleanor Bader, Mark Bailey, Bennett Baumer, Mike Burke, John Cheng, Joel Cook, Kenneth Crab, Ellen Davidson, Carlos Davalos, Soozy Duncan, Julia Dunn, Seth Fisher, Andrew Hinderaker, Leo Garcia, Samantha Gorelick, Mary Heglar, Alex Kane, Ruth Kelton, Sascha Krader, Micah Landau, Judith Lantigua, Daisy Lidz, Ana Nogueira, Jaisal Noor, Nicholas Powers, Katrin Redfern, Jacob Scheier, Ann Schneider, Sarah Secunda, Jacque Simone, Caroline Sykora, Gabriella Szpant, John Tarleton, Jimmy Tobias, Danny Valdes, S.M. Vidaurri, Eric Volpe, Steven Wishnia and Amy Wolf.

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## community calendar

TO SUBMIT AN EVENT FOR THE CALENDAR,  
EMAIL INDYEVENTS@GMAIL.COM.

#### TUES AUG 18

6:30pm • FREE  
READING: CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS ABOUT FOOD. Farm Sanctuary president Gene Baur reads from his book that details the morality and danger of industrial meat production. New York Public Library Mid-Manhattan Branch, 455 Fifth Ave nypl.org • 212-340-0833

#### WED AUG 19

6:30-8:30pm • \$5  
LECTURE: WOMEN, ART, AND ISLAM. Dr. Halima Taha will discuss the history of Islam in the United States and misconceptions about the roles of women within the religion. Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, 80 Hanson Pl, Bklyn mocada.org • 718-230-0492

6-11pm • \$10-20 Sliding Scale  
BENEFIT: BROOKLYN COMMUNITY HEALTH. Help support the Third Root Community Health Center, a worker cooperative of healthcare practitioners, on its 1-year anniversary. Live music, raffles and drink specials. 718-940-9343 • thirdroot.org

#### THURS AUG 20

7pm • Suggested donation \$5  
FILM SCREENING: THE LITTLE TRIP OF A DREAM. A documentary about a woman who visits her undocumented immigrant co-workers' families in Mexico. Producer Jen Lawhorne will lead a discussion. Bluestockings, 172 Allen St bluestockings.com • 212-777-6028

#### FRI AUG 21

5-7pm • FREE  
WORKSHOP: FRIDAY FISHING CLINICS. Join the Fishmobile & Lower East Side Ecology Center Staff for catch & release fishing. Fishing equipment is provided. Meet at East River Park, E 10th St and East River lesecologycenter.org • 212-477-4022

#### SAT AUG 22

2pm • FREE  
ACTION: ANNUAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE FOR NICHOLAS HEYWARD JR. A vigil will honor the 13-year-old shot and killed by NYPD brutality in 1995. Nicholas Naquan Heyward Jr Park, Wyckoff St, Bklyn october22-ny.org • 718-855-3861

#### SUN AUG 23

12pm • FREE  
MEETING: CELEBRATE YOUNG LORDS' LEGACY. Come and meet members of the former Puerto Rican nationalist group for their 40th anniversary reunion. First Spanish Methodist Church 163 E 111th St • 917-626-5847 panamaalba@yahoo.com

#### TUES AUG 25

6:30-7:45pm • FREE  
LECTURE: COMMUNITY ESTUARY SERIES 4. The fourth installment of this program will explore issues of coastal access and waterfront infrastructure development. New York Public Library, Ottendorfer Branch, 135 2nd Ave, 2nd Fl 212-477-4022 • lesecologycenter.org info@lesecologycenter.org

#### WED AUG 26

7pm • FREE  
DISCUSSION: THE IRAQI REFUGEE CRISIS. Elizabeth Dewan and Raed Jarrar of American Friends Service Committee will speak about the conditions of the Iraqi refugee population, including refugee communities in New York and New Jersey. Brooklyn Friends Meeting House, 110 Schermerhorn St, Bklyn • panys.org

#### THUR AUG 27

7:30pm • FREE  
FILM SCREENING: A GARDEN OF DELIGHTS. Paper Tiger Television will show excerpts of documentaries about Tompkins Square Park, Lower East Side gentrification and guerrilla street art. Sixth St and Ave B Community Garden papertiger.org • 212-982-5673

## AUG—SEPT



#### TUES AUG 25, 7PM • HURRICANE KATRINA ANNIVERSARY

FILM: *TROUBLE THE WATER* is the story of a couple navigating the Katrina disaster with resilience and determination. On the 4th anniversary of the storm, join the DVD release party with the directors and producers. Suggested donation \$5.

#### SAT AUG 29

7:30pm • \$3  
DISCUSSION: WOMEN'S RIGHTS DAY CELEBRATION. Radical Women organizer Anne Slater will lead a discussion about mobilizing women and their allies to stand against rightwing racism, layoffs and state budget cuts. A benefit for Radical Women Fund Drive. Freedom Hall, 113 W 128th St radicalwomen.org • 212-222-0633 nycradicalwomen@nyct.net

#### SUN AUG 30

2pm • FREE  
PERFORMANCE: 2009 ANNUAL SUMMER STREET THEATER TOUR. The boisterous musical *Tally Ho!*, or *Navigating the Future*, directed by Crystal Field, is a hilarious commentary on greed and the financial crisis. Part of a month-long traveling event hosted by Theater for the New City. See website for info. Washington Square Park theaterforthenewcity.net • 212-254-1109

#### MON AUG 31

6-8pm • FREE  
READING: LIFE ON THE COLOR LINE. City College of New York president Gregory H. Williams will discuss his memoir, *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*. Center for Worker Education, 25 Broadway • cuny.edu • 212-925-6625

#### TUES SEPT 1 – THURS SEPT 3

Tues 1-6pm, Wed 8am-8pm, Thurs 8am-5:30pm • Free (Reg. by Aug. 21 req'd)  
WORKSHOP: "RADICAL WELCOME: CELEBRATING AND DEFENDING COMMUNITY WITHOUT BORDERS." Activists will discuss efforts to protect undocumented immigrants, receive training in organizing and become familiar with immigration law. Riverside Church, 490 Riverside Dr newsanctuarynyc.org • 212-995-0844

#### THURS SEPT 3

7pm • FREE  
READING: UNREPENTANT RADICAL EDUCATOR. The subject of Tony Monchinski's book is the prolific radical author and Queens College (CUNY) political science professor. (See *The Indypendent's* review on Page 11). Revolution Books, 146 W 26th St revolutionbooksnyc.org • 212-691-3345

#### FRI SEPT 4

10pm • FREE  
ACTION: CENTRAL PARK MOONLIGHT RIDE. Promote clean and sustainable transportation alternatives with a leisurely ride through the park. Columbus Circle, SW corner of Central Park • times-up.org • 212-802-2222

#### NEXT ISSUE: SEPTEMBER 18

## reader comments

Post your own comments online at the end of each article or email letters@indypendent.org.

*Response to "Georgia Parents Fight Military High School," July 24:*

Way to watch your school board! So often boring, yet so important. I am thinking lately that much of the success of recruiting in schools comes about because the people who know what's happening often are employees who have little power in the organization, and the citizens with the power only find out after the fact about what went on.

—LISA FROM MAINE

*Response to "Bronx Cookie Workers Fight Buyout," July 24:*

We now have reason to believe that Lance, Inc. has backed out of the deal to buy the Stella D'oro brand from Brynwood Partners!

This is a very important victory, although we cannot claim credit for it. Our efforts to pressure them and their investors probably had some impact, but no one can say for sure why they made their ultimate decision. But, whatever their reasons, it is wonderful news! In the meanwhile, we'd like to thank all of you for your help in defeating this damning deal between Lance and Brynwood Partners. Now it's forward on to the next battle to keep Stella D'oro in the Bronx and under a union contract!

—STELLA D'ORO  
SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE

*Responses to "Bacon as a Weapon of Mass Destruction," July 24:*

This is a powerful article, providing a detailed synopsis of a deeper string of issues associated with the fast food industry. Anyone who argues that independent farmers are having an easy time

surviving in this age of factory farming clearly does not have a well-rounded understanding of the issues associated with this sickening industry. Fast food corporations need to be held accountable for an endless list of abuses that affect each and every one of us, monetarily, environmentally and physically.

—GEETHA THURAIRAJAH

Not to be missed concerning the changes in the meat-packing industry is the cultural devastation the lack of well-paying agricultural-related jobs have on the traditional way of life in rural America. Read Nick Reding's *Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town*.

—JEANELLE LUST

American farmers use technological advances to build and operate modern livestock, poultry and crop production systems in the quest to provide high quality food to a hungry nation and



world. Exaggerated articles like this and the associated comments spread misinformation, cause undue hysteria and damage the personal and professional reputations of many hard-working American farmers.

—JERRY FOSTER

*Continued on Page 9*



# Green Oasis May Be Uprooted



**THREATENED:** The Reverend DeVanie Jackson stands between rows of crops planted at the Brooklyn Rescue Mission’s farm in Bedford-Stuyvesant. PHOTO: ANDREW HINDERAKER

By SASCHA KRADER

Fresh food can be hard to find in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Yet around the corner from eateries like Youngtze River Chinese Takeout and the Malcolm X Boulevard Pizzeria, the Brooklyn Rescue Mission’s farm grows 7,000 pounds of produce a year, most of which is provided to the local community for free.

In Bed-Stuy, known to many as a “food desert,” nearly eight in 10 food stores are bodegas, which makes it difficult for residents to find fresh, healthy food.

The 5,000-square-foot oasis at 255 Bainbridge Street yields an array of produce — the farm’s beds swell with zucchini, eggplant, peppers, kale, tomatoes, chard and sunflowers. A fig tree towers over the farm’s back end, and a dragonfly flits over the herbs.

However, this could be the farm’s last season. The New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) is asking the Bed-Stuy Farm, half of which is rooted in an undeveloped lot owned by HPD, to move. The Brooklyn Rescue Mission said it received a phone call from HPD a few months ago asking the farm to move to a new site through the city’s GreenThumb program. The other half of the farm is located in the Brooklyn Rescue Mission’s backyard.

“The farm is a location and a destination,” said the Reverend DeVanie Jackson, who founded the farm with her husband, the Reverend Robert Jackson, in 2005. “Where else can people get food picked the same day for free?”

According to the Brooklyn Rescue Mission, they moved onto the HPD property after it sat empty and delinquent for years. Filled with broken concrete, the HPD lot elicited complaints from neighbors who feared it would become a breeding ground for rats.

In 2003, the Jacksons teamed up with New York Cares and other organizations to clean out the lot. They initially filled it with wood chips, but over time, food shortages at the Rescue Mission convinced them to farm on it.

“We see ourselves as almost people who should be paid for taking care of the land,” DeVanie said. “[The developers] left a tangled mess, they left an eyesore, and now it’s a viable, useful place for the community.”

In addition to providing free organic produce through its food pantry, Bed-Stuy Farm gives cooking classes, holds workshops in garden science, provides jobs to local teenagers through New York City’s Summer Youth Employment program and hosts a social center for local seniors.

According to the couple, on an average

summer day more than 100 people visit the farm.

“On the one hand [the Rescue Mission’s work] is about getting fresh food to folks’ tables who need it,” said volunteer Thor Ritz. “But it’s also about getting people together to relearn or rethink what it is that they eat — to basically empower folks to obtain healthy food and make it part of their lives.”

There are multiple advantages to growing food in the city, including producing better quality food and reducing consumers’ carbon footprint by limiting the amount of energy involved in transporting food, said Devon Spencer, educational director of the Science Barge, a Yonkers-based educational project that promotes city farming.

Spencer said most of the students she meets at the Science Barge “have never gotten the chance to hold a worm or pick a ripe tomato.”

The land now in dispute was sold years ago to a nonprofit holding company, Neighborhood Partnership HDfC, that wanted to renovate a house on the property, DeVanie said. But the house, which was beyond repair, was demolished, leaving the land unkempt and undeveloped for years.

Now Neighborhood Partnership HDfC wants to sell the lot to recoup their costs, the *Daily News* reported July 29. HPD did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

“The intent was always to do affordable housing on this site,” HPD official Margaret Sheffer told the *Daily News*. “The garden had essentially come in as a squatter.”

The farm’s supporters are currently circulating an online petition asking HPD to protect the Brooklyn Rescue Mission. At press time, it had more than 1,300 signatures.

“This is more than a garden,” DeVanie said. “It’s a connection to community in a way which is not so easily moved.”

The Jacksons also plan to meet with City Council members to make their case. Robert is hopeful that if they “keep the pressure on,” HPD will back down.

DeVanie said she spends many of her summer afternoons tending the garden.

One recent afternoon, she gestured toward a dragonfly that landed on a nearby plant. It didn’t fly away.

“That dragonfly isn’t going anywhere,” DeVanie said. “He was born here.”



By BENNETT BAUMER

Tenant groups pressuring the New York State Senate for vital rent reforms are finding strange bedfellows.

The tenant advocacy coalition is relying on cooperation from former Senate coup leader Hiram Monserrate (D-Queens) and Democratic conference leader John Sampson (D-Brooklyn), a former real-estate attorney, to get their top priority — repeal of vacancy decontrol — passed in a special session this fall.

Monserrate is widely expected to take over the Senate housing committee in place of Pedro Espada Jr. (D-Bronx), who was the ringleader in the June Senate brouhaha. In a deal to end the Senate stalemate after Monserrate returned to the Democratic fold, Espada is now the majority leader, although his actual power is yet to be seen.

Here’s the kicker — a judge has slated Monserrate’s trial for felony assault for Sept. 14, and if convicted, Monserrate would be expelled from the Senate. The Senate will convene sometime in late September or early October to deal with further budget cuts to state services and programs. Monserrate vowed his support of affordable-housing reforms — but his expulsion would mean one less vote for passing progressive rent-reform legislation.

Sampson could be a boon or bust for rent reform. Tenants and their Senate allies are pushing him and Gov. David Paterson to get behind rent reform as a tradeoff for working New Yorkers facing a brutalizing \$2 billion of budget cuts in the fall session.

Vacancy decontrol is the process by which a landlord can deregulate an apartment when the rent reaches \$2,000 a month and there is a vacancy. Tenants and Neighbors, a tenant advocacy organization, estimates that more than 100,000 affordable rent-regulated apartments have been deregulated in New York City since decontrol was enacted in the 1990s. Once an apartment is deregulated, the landlord can raise the rent as high as he wants, and tenants lose important protections, such as the right to a lease renewal. There currently remain approximately one million rent-stabilized units in the city.

“We believe we can pass repeal of vacancy decontrol. We’ve done a good job of keeping in the face of our friends,” said Michael McKee of Tenants Political Action Committee. “Though there are Senate Democrats that are concerned about real-estate money.”

Tenant groups mobilized daily vans to Albany from May through July to catch senators in the hallways in order to buttonhole them on rent reform.

But the political power of real-estate campaign contributions is daunting. According to the *New York Times*, the real-estate lobby gave Senate Democrats \$750,000 in 2008, 15 times as much as in 2006. Real-estate contributions are believed to be a driving force behind Espada’s defection to the Republican Party this summer. Espada has not filed accurate campaign finance reports, so it is difficult to decipher the true influence of landlord contributions on his flip-flop.

Even tenants’ staunchest allies can succumb. For example, Sen. Eric Adams (D-Brooklyn) made troubling comments about pay-to-play politics at the recent Brooklyn Real Estate Roundtable luncheon, according to the New York daily business publication, *Crain’s*. Adams told the crowd he was creating a caucus of business-friendly Democrats.

“Because you failed to nurture the relationships, you found yourself out of the conversation. How many of you made investments in the Democrats when we were two seats away? You failed to diversify,” Adams reportedly said.

But signs of progress are clear with Sampson and others. After much protest, tenant advocates got tepid commitments to vote for vacancy-decontrol repeal from Sen. Jeff Klein (D-Bronx/Westchester) and his close ally Sen. Diane Savino (D-Staten Island/South Brooklyn), who announced her support at a tenant rally at the State Capitol in late spring.

## A Life of Art and Activism Comes to an End

Valerie Caris Blitz, a longtime New York City-based painter, actress and activist, died July 28 after a long illness. She was 52.

Influenced by “all the disciplines of the 20th-century avant-garde,” she was heavily involved with the Lower East Side art space ABC No Rio in its early days, exhibiting her paintings and performing there. She also spent time in Berlin, where eccentric art dealer Emanuela Schwankl organized her first solo show. She appeared in more than 40 films, including Ari Roussimoff’s *Shadows of the City* and Michael Brynntrup’s *Die Botschaft* (The Message).

After she was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, her work became more conceptual. Her pieces “Queen Sex Positive” and “Vestment” were part of the Sur Rodney Sur show “Blood



Fairies.” In the last 10 years, she returned to her first love, abstract-expressionist painting. She also volunteered at the Mayday Books infoshop.

“There are a number of women with AIDS who become artists because AIDS pushes them into expression,” said performance artist Penny Arcade. “Valerie was an artist before she got AIDS, and having AIDS then became her subject matter.”

She is survived by her husband, percussionist Eric Blitz, and their four cats.

—INDYPENDENT STAFF



# Worker-Run Businesses Flourish in Argentina

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JAISAL NOOR

Maria Alejandra, a factory worker in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, Argentina, spends her days cutting pieces of rawhide at the Huesitos de Wilde Cooperative. Along with the 33 other original workers at the dog treat factory, Alejandra now makes twice as much money — 2,000 pesos a month — as she did under her former boss. Alejandra, 41, who has worked at the factory for 14 years, is now able to listen to music and drink maté, a South American herbal tea, while she works.

The Huesitos de Wilde Cooperative is just one of more than 250 worker-recovered businesses in Argentina, which employ a total of 13,000 workers. Part of a broader effort to recover factories, which started after the country's economic collapse in 2001, the workers at Huesitos de Wilde first occupied the factory and took over production in January 2007.

Though Argentina's economy has improved since the crash, the current economic downturn has caused a recent increase in factory take overs, with a significant uptick since February.

Nearly 20 factories have been occupied since 2008, and 33 new cooperatives have been officially registered with the government in the past few months. While the government readily grants businesses cooperative status — there are currently some 10,000 cooperatives in Argentina — gaining this recognition is the first step for the few hundred recovered enterprises that wish to be worker-run. However, the government has yet to recognize the legal right of any of these recently recovered businesses to exist.

While cooperative enterprises do allow workers a greater role in company decisions, worker-recovered businesses allow employees to reclaim lost jobs, as well as receive the same wages and equally participate in management decisions, as is the case with Huesitos de Wilde.

Workers who seek to recover a business from their owners are faced with numerous challenges. In addition to often lacking management experience, the struggle to find start-up money and maintain a profitable business can often sideline reclaimed enterprises.

The workers at Huesitos de Wilde were offered guidance by an array of groups, including the Argentine Workers Center, a trade-union federation.

"Once we were taught, we came back to take over the factory," Alejandra said.

Reclaiming factories that have been abandoned by owners provides workers with a way to counter the self-interest of some employers, according to Marie Trigona, a journalist and filmmaker who has worked with Free Speech Radio News and *Z Magazine*.

Businessmen often exploit crises by declaring bankruptcy so they can set up shop elsewhere and hire cheaper labor or invest their money in more lucrative projects, Trigona said.

While Argentina has provided business owners with the option to run cooperatives since the late 19th century, the country's road to an option such as worker-run enterprises has not been an easy one. Argentina's history has been plagued by neoliberal policies, such as widespread privatization, deregulation and cutbacks in social services.

Prior to the military coup of 1976, Argentina was one of the wealthiest nations in Latin America. It was the envy of the developing world, with strong labor laws and an unemployment rate of 4.2 percent. But after seven years of brutal military dictatorship — which were marked by widespread torture and the "disappearance" of 30,000 political opponents — followed by a string of pro-free market governments, these progressive policies were eroded.

By the 1990s, Argentina was viewed by the West as a poster-child for embracing neoliberal policies championed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. But when the speculation-driven economic bubble of the 1990s burst in December 2001, the country's banking system collapsed. Business owners declared bankruptcy, fired scores of workers and moved their money offshore, resulting in a capital flight of \$18.7 billion in 2001.

Argentine civil society responded through popular revolt against the government and economic elite. Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets and toppled four governments in a matter of weeks. Factory takeovers were commonplace, and violent clashes with police led to dozens of civilian deaths over the next several years.

In 2002, the unemployment rate was 25 percent, with another 20 percent of workers underemployed and 60 percent of the country living in poverty. Workers began taking over factories in an attempt to reclaim their livelihoods.

Argentina's economy began recovering from the collapse in 2003. From 2003 to 2008, for "most recovered factories, the priority was growing economically, finding capital, or raising capital through work. Most of them have done pretty well, while others have just survived," said Esteban Magnani, who has worked extensively with the recovered-business movement in Argentina and is the author of *The Silent Change: Recovered Businesses in Argentina*.

By early 2007, more than 170 businesses were worker-run, though the vast majority were not recognized by the government as legal businesses.

Members of the Huesitos de Wilde Cooperative credit La Base, the Argentine-based counterpart of the U.S. micro-finance organization Working World, as well as the broader community of groups that support worker-run cooperatives, with the factory's continued success.

This support network proved to be invaluable when the workers returned to the factory to reclaim it and discovered that most of the plant's machinery had been removed.

With help from the Employees and Superviz-



**AUTONOMOUS FACTORY:** Los Huesitos de Wilde cooperative members in Buenos Aires, Argentina, chop large sheets of raw leather to be cured. These workers do not need a boss to make dog treats.



**SCOOPY SNACKS:** Workers at Huesitos de Wilde do the final task of packaging finished dog treats into plastic bags. The factory is one of hundreds of worker-recovered businesses in Argentina.

sors Union and a \$15,000 loan from La Base, the workers were able to buy back the equipment before it was sold at the auction block as well as purchase raw materials. But the process was far from easy. For many months, workers went without paychecks, and only 33 of the original 200 workers chose to remain in the cooperative. Of the workers that left, some have found work while many are still unemployed.

The Working World, founded by Brendan Martin in 2004, offers collateral-free loans with no enforcement mechanism for repayment. While the interest rates on the loans given to Huesitos de Wilde range from 10 to 18 percent, the repayment rate for all Working World loans is 98 percent.

Though the Huesitos de Wilde Cooperative has managed to keep its factory doors open, the workers still do not own the property. They could be evicted at anytime.

While Huesitos de Wilde only received preliminary approval last February under the law of expropriations, they must continue producing so they can pay off the debt owed by the former owner, thus keeping them in a state of legal limbo until they receive final approval and can be granted ownership of the factory.

According to Magnani, while the state has indicated that expropriation laws, which would provide cooperatives with legal permission to use owner assets, might be enacted, the legal support provided by this legislation would be weak.

"The future of the recovered factories, both the new and the old, is still uncertain," Magnani said. "Of the older ones, just a few have managed to get the property of assets."

Despite the challenges facing the workers

at Huesitos de Wilde, the state of worker-run cooperatives in the United States is still far behind Argentina.

Late last year, more than 250 fired workers at the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago held a successful six-day sit-in demanding vacation and severance pay.

While the factory remains open after recently being purchased by California-based Serious Materials, a company that manufactures green building supplies, only 15 of the workers have been able to return to work since May, as production has been slow. Serious Materials hopes that an infusion of federal stimulus funds for weatherization will increase demand for the company's products and allow them to re-hire all 250 workers.

Though the workers did consider the possibility of taking over the factory themselves, Mark Meinster, a representative of United Electrical Workers, the union to which the Republic workers belong, told *The Independent* earlier this year that the lack of a recovered-factory movement in the United States made this an unlikely possibility.

"The fact that no real movement of worker-run enterprises exists in the U.S. makes this option much more difficult at this point," Meinster said.

Despite the current global recession, the Huesitos de Wilde Cooperative is thriving, and has recently hired eight more employees. The workers remain optimistic, regardless of their lack of legal ownership of the factory.

"The truth is that you can work without a boss. We have learned that you can continue ... and you can succeed," Alejandra said.

## BROOKLYN TO PALESTINE ONLINE ((i))

*Independent* contributors Soozy Duncan and Ellen Davidson break the siege by reporting from Palestine. Duncan traveled in July with the Viva Palestina/U.S. convoy, which delivered \$1 million in medical supplies to Gaza. As a volunteer helping rebuild Palestinian homes, Davidson writes about the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions in East Jerusalem. Find their stories and photos online at [indypendent.org](http://indypendent.org).



**A BIG SLICE OF PROFIT:** A Huesitos de Wilde employee slices sheets of cured leather into strips that will be dyed, rolled and baked into dog treats. Workers have direct control of their profits.



# A Real Stella Solution

By Peter Ranis

The 136 workers who ended their strike against Bronx-based Stella D’oro Biscuit Co. in July could offer a test case of whether the public sector is willing to intervene on behalf of workers.

With the United States facing its greatest rates of unemployment and under-employment in decades — currently 9.4 and 16.3 percent respectfully — the efforts of Stella D’oro workers and neighborhood members will not be enough to save these jobs. What is needed is a coalition that includes neighborhood and labor groups, as well as legal and political activists, that will push the New York City Council and New York State Legislature, to apply eminent domain laws to keep the Stella D’oro factory where it is by having it become a worker-run cooperative.

The Stella D’oro workers, who are represented by Local 50 of the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Union, have shown themselves to be a coherent and solid group of workers, striking for 11 months to keep their jobs — without a single participant crossing the picket line. On June 30, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that Brynwood Partners, the owners of Stella D’oro, had engaged in unlawful labor practices.

Hard on the heels of this victory, Brynwood Partners announced plans to close the factory by October. The time is ripe, especially in the era of the Obama presidency, to use eminent domain to expropriate with compensation enterprises like Stella D’oro, which are in danger of being sold or moved out of state by their super-profit-seeking owners and managers.

In the United States, eminent domain has been used for many decades to make way for the construction of various public projects, ranging from highways and hospitals to municipal offices, schools and public parks.

In 2005, the Supreme Court expanded the government’s power of eminent domain when it ruled in *Kelo v. New London* that the city of New London, Conn., could seize private property for reasons of “public purpose.” According to the Court, this was a permissible public use under the takings clause of the Constitution, as the intent was

to create jobs and increase tax revenues.

In the preponderance of state constitutions, eminent domain is permitted for “stated public purposes” or a “recognized public purpose.” Compensation is paid at the market value of the factory at the time of expropriation.

In the case of Stella D’oro, the factory would be turned over, with an initial public subsidy, to the employees. Without owners and managers, the workers have the technical skills to run these factories as cooperatives while saving the huge salaries skimmed off the top by former managers.

If eminent domain was applied to keep the Stella D’oro factory in the Bronx, the purchase of the factory would be funded through a combination of state or city compensation (which would be paid over a period of years) along with a temporary public subsidy or low-interest loan guarantee, which would guarantee the factory’s productivity in the initial months of the transition. This financial assistance would, in most cases, be less than the tax concessions, subsidies and other benefits routinely showered on private businesses that maintain or bring jobs into a community. And in the Stella D’oro case, no new land seizure is required and no displacement of homes or other businesses would occur.

Eminent domain is a mechanism of legislative public policy, no different from the power to tax or regulate workplaces to ensure the health and safety of employees and surrounding communities. It must be used creatively. The current crisis of American labor requires new forms of alternative union associations that go beyond collective bargaining.

Why shouldn’t federal recovery and stimulus measures be directed at workers who make products or provide services rather than subsidizing failing investment banks and insurance companies?

Brynwood Partners cannot be free of societal obligations. By outsourcing their functions, they have broken a social contract for which there must be reparations and consequences. Labor has few options, and the use of eminent domain would begin a debate about the obligations and potential of communities, city councils and state legislatures to dent the silence and retreat of American labor before the loss of jobs with livable wages.

*Peter Ranis is the author of Class, Democracy and Labor in Contemporary Argentina. He has written extensively about the factory*



**COMMUNITY ACTION:** Union activist Judy Gonzales protests outside the Bronx-based Stella D’oro Biscuit Co. as the factory’s striking employees returned to work July 7 after winning an 11-month strike. The workers are now organizing to stop the owners from closing the plant. PHOTO: MICAH LANDAU

Vinie Burrows, Kassahun Checole, Imani Countess, Jennifer Davis, Kenyon Farrow, Silvia Federici & George Caffentzis, Haymarket Books, Jean & George Houser, Chaz Maviyane, Liz Mestres, Matt Meyer & Meg Starr, Sonia Sanchez, Bill Sutherland & Marilyn Meyer

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REPORTED BY JACOB SCHEIER

WRITTEN BY JOHN TARLETON  
AND JACOB SCHEIER

PHOTOS BY MARK BAILEY



Brooklyn residents had reason to pause from a leisurely Sunday afternoon in Sunset Park July 19 when Reverend Billy Talen began preaching. His bleached blond pompadour and energy made him appear significantly younger than his 59 years of age. Wearing his white suit and a priest's collar, the faux televangelist-turned-mayoral candidate paced back and forth, his indignation growing as he described the city's plan to rezone Sunset Park for luxury condos that could block the neighborhood's famous view of the Manhattan skyline. He was accompanied by a green-robed choir that broke out into a gospel version of the First Amendment.

"Mike Bloomberg, your idea of prosperity is what we call the demon monoculture!" Reverend Billy shouted into his megaphone.

**AS BLOOMBERG AND THE REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY GENTRIFIES THE CITY, PERFORMANCE ACTIVIST REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS PREACHING A GOSPEL OF NEIGHBORHOOD REVIVAL. BUT, IS HE ONLY PREACHING TO THE CHOIR?**

which perform earnest, original songs with an anti-consumerist message.

In tone and style, Reverend Billy is as verbose and over the top as any late-night televangelist. But he's serious, too. As campaign Media Manager Michael O'Neil says, "the collar is fake, but the issues are real." By putting a progressive text into the mouth of the often bigoted and conservative evangelist figure, Reverend Billy forces his audience to mix up their symbols and labels.

He is a figure straight out of the satirical novels of his friend and admirer, the late Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

In 1999, he became notorious for holding a large stuffed Mickey Mouse crucified on a cross to protest the placement of an 18,000-square-foot Disney Store in the heart of Times

and compassion."

Through it all, Reverend Billy has continued to champion neighborhood groups from Union Square to Coney Island that are resisting Mayor Bloomberg's gentrification juggernaut. Reverend Billy has also continued to be a fierce advocate of the right to dissent. Two years ago he was arrested in Union Square for using a bullhorn to recite the First Amendment. He sued the city for false arrest, resulting in an out of court settlement of \$23,000 for the preacher-activist. Reverend Billy by his own estimation has been arrested at least 40 times in the past decade.

In March, Reverend Billy launched his mayoral campaign as the nominee of the Green Party. However, his vision of knitting together a city-wide movement of neighborhood-based activists, what he calls a "local rights movement" has proven more elusive than he and his supporters had hoped.

Running a protest campaign on a shoe-string budget, Reverend Billy doesn't dwell on how he can compete with Bloomberg, the billionaire incumbent, or likely Democratic nominee William Thompson, Jr. Instead, he has sought to use his outsized persona to steal some of the city's election spotlight with the hope that for a moment, people will realize the absurdity of politics as normal and rethink what is possible. Parody and humor being, at times, the only way to speak truth to power.

"Bloomberg persuades people that what is happening in this city is normal through \$100 million in advertising. Something's got to wake us up," he says. "It might just be the comic preacher. Who could say it isn't?"

Durkee thinks the parameters of what is "real" should be reconsidered. "We are surreal," she says, "because at this point we feel that's what can break through this lie, this normalizing system of neoliberal capital we see all around us."

Some Green Party members remain unimpressed. Bronx County Green Party chair Carl Lundgren said that when Reverend Billy met with the Bronx Greens he was unable to answer important policy questions, while 2002 Green Party gubernatorial candidate and academic Stanley Aronowitz echoed this sentiment saying "Reverend Billy is a comedian ... I don't get an indication he has a policy on anything."

Reverend Billy, who lives in the almost box-free neighborhood of Windsor Terrace in Central Brooklyn, insists he has a clear program. "It's not romantic, it's not a Hallmark card, it's very specific," he says. "A healthy neighborhood must be identified and protected. It is our economy, it is our soul, it is the source of our greatness."

#### INSIDE THE CAMPAIGN

Reverend Billy's campaign is based out of a small, airy SoHo storefront on Lafayette Street. During the day, Campaign Manager Austin Osmer can often be found in a small back office, working away, while volunteers shuffle in and out to pick up petitions or to just hang out. It's not just a campaign headquarters, but a social space. For instance, the campaign hosts regular BYOB documentary-films nights at the office.

But Wednesday evenings are for business. This is when the weekly campaign meetings occur. They attract between 20 to 30 regular volunteers. After participants introduce themselves and identify the neighborhood they live in, updates are provided about upcoming events or other information, such as prime spots to petition.

The core volunteer group, with a few exceptions, is made up of people in their 20s and 30s, most of who live in Brooklyn. The majority is white, but a handful are people of color, including Outreach Coordinator Michael Premo.

Many are involved, not because they believe in electoral politics, but because they believe in Reverend Billy.

Gaylen Hamilton, a choir member from Bedford-Stuyvesant, says, "I would never be

involved with a political campaign ever, because politics is a total broken crock of shit. However, I am inspired by Billy's vision."

"I'm tired of incremental politics," says Katie Lyon-Hart, a development associate at a nonprofit that works closely with establishment politicians. "... What Billy does, he gets out there and yells at people and makes a scene. People are very used to the political machine [and] in order to really excite and get them off their ass, you have to make a scene and that can in a way work in tandem with maybe more practical approaches."

Asked why she's not working for Tony Avella, a progressive City Councilmember from Queens who is challenging Thompson for the Democratic Party nomination, Lyon-Hart said, "[His] campaign isn't as fun."

The sentiments of volunteers like Hamilton and Lyon-Hart are what local (mostly Brooklyn) Green Party leaders hoped to hear when they recruited Reverend Billy in the hopes he would galvanize fresh interest in their party, which emphasizes environmental and social justice issues.

"He's been an activist for going on 10-plus years," says Brooklyn Green Party treasurer Mike Emperor. "He will reach out to a potential base who don't like politics as usual."

However, can even a supercharged personality like Reverend Billy transform a party that has existed on the margins of state and city politics for over a decade?

In 1998, Al "Grandpa Munster" Lewis won just more than 50,000 votes as the Green Party gubernatorial candidate in New York. Subsequent Green candidates were unable to match Lewis's total in 2002 and 2006. In New York City, Green mayoral candidates failed to attain 1 percent of the vote in both 2001 and 2005, and the Greens have never come close to winning a City Council seat. Reverend Billy told *The Independent* that he "thinks" he voted for Democratic candidate Fernando Ferrer in the 2005 mayoral election, but says he can't recall for sure.

#### A CLASH OF CULTURES

The Greens and Reverend Billy have worked doggedly to win the support of the community-based organizations whose causes Billy has long championed. However, the *existential* politics of Reverend Billy mixes like oil and water when confronting the *transactional* politics of more pragmatic groups looking to meet the immediate needs of their members through the existing political power structure.

Many of these organizations are tax-exempt 501(c)3 not-for-profit corporations and by law they cannot formally endorse candidates. Nonetheless, there are a number of ways they can offer a boost, such as issue-based advocacy, shared social networks, laudatory coverage of a friendly politician's assistance in a group's newsletter and invitations to speak at candidates' forums.

*The Independent* contacted a cross-section of almost 30 progressive grassroots nonprofit groups in the city to gauge their interest in Reverend Billy's campaign. Only a handful said they were engaged with the campaign, albeit in ways that did not violate the 501(c)3 restrictions, including Retail Action Project, the Street Vendors Project and Time's Up!, an alternative transportation group.

More typical is the Greenwich Village Society for Historical Preservation, which Reverend Billy supported in its effort to prevent New York University's recent demolition of the Provincetown Playhouse. The group recently held a series of town hall-style "breakfast forums" in conjunction with the Historic Districts Council to discuss the neighborhood's future with mayoral candidates. Democratic candidates Thompson and Avella participated. Bloomberg turned down the invitation, and Reverend Billy was not invited. Simeon Bankoff, the executive director of the Historic Districts Council, says he considers Reverend Billy "a fellow traveler," but that only the most

viable candidates were invited.

The Working Families Party (WFP) — a union-based third party that frequently aligns itself with the Democrats — unapologetically declined to invite Reverend Billy to their July 2 candidates' forum.

"Reverend Billy is running a protest campaign and that's great," says WFP spokesperson Dan Levitan in an email to *The Independent*. "Sometimes you need to speak truth to power. But the WFP is about campaigns that can win, and our members wanted to hear from the candidates who stand a real chance of defeating the Mayor."

#### 'HOPE AND UNCERTAINTY'

As Reverend Billy's campaign headed into the summer, it faced a mounting series of difficulties, including raising enough money to keep its \$7,000-per-month storefront open, a slow start to the petition drive to get Reverend Billy on the ballot and a sudden medical crisis.

A July 27 benefit concert featuring folk music legend Joan Baez raised \$15,000, bringing some temporary financial relief for the campaign.

As *The Independent* goes to press, the campaign says it has gathered more than 15,000 signatures, or three-fourths of their initial goal of 20,000. The campaign has hired 28 paid petitioners, and is planning to hire a half dozen more, as it races toward an Aug. 18 deadline for handing signatures in.

Mayoral candidates have to collect 7,500 valid signatures. In reality, a candidate needs to collect at least twice that much to make up for petition signers who are not registered to vote, or who fill out the petition form erroneously. Third-party candidates also face an additional hurdle: Republican and Democratic candidates get to go first in the petitioning process. The two major parties' petitioning period ended in mid-July. Registered voters who have already signed a petition for one mayoral candidate cannot do so for another.

The anxieties of making rent and collecting enough petition signatures were overshadowed in early July when an irregular heartbeat landed Reverend Billy in the hospital.

Shortly after his hospital stay, Reverend Billy blogged that he had hoped the economic collapse would lead to "the recovery of independent culture," but "the mega-corporations are working overtime to get their domination back. "Now," he wrote, "I have the same hope and uncertainty with my own body."

Reverend Billy was visibly weaker following the first few weeks of his hospitalization. He also missed some campaign events, due to difficulties adjusting to changes in his medication: a combination of blood thinners and beta blockers.

During a recent petitioning party outside campaign headquarters, Reverend Billy wore a 24-hour EKG beneath his preacher's costume, the small device recording his heartbeat, as he preached and talked with curious strangers about defending neighborhoods.

One wouldn't think to look at him that aside from being a faux-preacher with revolutionary aspirations, he was also a late-middle-aged man contemplating his own mortality.

But the prognosis, he says, is positive, and he may be able to stop taking the medications soon. His doctors have encouraged him to keep campaigning. Perhaps for now the grimmest outcome of this health scare is the medical bills, which are only partially covered by insurance. Reverend Billy and Durkee had already dipped into their modest savings to keep the campaign going, while watching their earnings drop due to not having time to do more paid performances.

Reflecting on the sacrifices he and his wife have made, Reverend Billy admits he has moments of doubt about his current path. "You have to set aside doubts," he says. "It's kind of part of the basic requirement of this approach to living, and in that sense, it is like a faith."

For more info, [voterevbilly.org](http://voterevbilly.org) or [revbilly.com](http://revbilly.com).



**Top left:** Reverend Billy campaigns in Sunset Park July 19 with the Church of Life After Shopping gospel choir.

**Bottom left:** Media Manager Michael O'Neil in the campaign's SoHo Lafayette Street office.

**Above, top to bottom:** TEAMWORK: The weekly Wednesday evening campaign meeting with volunteers.

**EXORCISM:** Reverend Billy speaks at a protest rally outside Scoop NYC July 8. Fifteen fired workers of the upscale retail chain recently filed a lawsuit claiming \$500,000 in unpaid overtime wages and lost earnings.

**ON THE MOVE:** Reverend Billy and the gospel choir leave Tompkins Square Park July 12 to march to Ray's Candy Store, at the corner of Avenue A and East 7th Street, to offer their support of the shop's embattled owner.



# The Dark Heart of War

*The Hurt Locker*  
DIRECTED BY KATHRYN BIGELOW  
SUMMIT ENTERTAINMENT, 2009



**T**he *Hurt Locker* essentially reverses the popular notion that advances in electronic media representation exert a dehumanizing impact on the dynamics of postmodern warfare. From “embedded” reporter coverage to Kuma-produced video games, the dictates of reality TV and Nintendo-ization have situated the battlefield in hyperspace, where the Iraq War hits the Facebook generation — civilian and soldier alike — with a powerful, immediate blend of rhetorical and sensory s(t)imulation. The revolution in military affairs has produced war as a media event — an encompassing, virtually integrated, impersonally shared network-centric experience.

It is perhaps regrettable that many critics are praising Kathryn Bigelow’s latest film precisely in terms of its experiential quality, of how it immerses us in what combat is really like. *The Hurt Locker* undeniably packs a mean visceral punch, but there is far too much intelligence and subtlety to Mark Boal’s script and Bigelow’s direction for them not to go against the current war movie standard of replicable shock-and-awe realism, upheld in such movies as *In the Valley of Ellah*, *The Kingdom* and *Rendition*. Instead, they take life on the front extremely person-

ally, so much so that it registers as an absolutely individual condition, which is never representative and can therefore not be generalized or authentically mediated.

War yields no subjective image, and its hidden face appears in inscrutably plain view on the countenance of the three good men who make up Bravo Company’s Explosive Ordnance Disposal team: ace and wild card Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), whose fearless demeanor is only trumped by his technical brilliance, and the more cautious, circumspect Sergeants J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) and Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), both brave but not foolish enough to put self-sacrifice before the prospect of returning home in one piece.

James assumes leadership after his predecessor (Guy Pearce) is killed by a cell phone-detonated IED (improvised explosive device) in the opening sequence. The trio has one month of duty left, and the sporadic display of an ever-narrowing timeframe reminds us how different temporal perceptions determine their respective attitudes. While Eldridge serves out his days just to survive, the more seasoned Sanborn, as he emerges through the cracks of Mackie’s robust delivery, struggles with the uncertain

future of civilian life. (If there’s no place like home, then how to escape the void?) Not so for James, whose sense of time is circular. Bigelow shows him stranded in a reclaimed domestic realm, telling his little son that when we grow up, we lose our love for most things we were fond of as children. Defusing makeshift bombs in hostile territory has become James’s only passion, the labor of love that compels him to return to Iraq and anchors him there.

Through every new challenge, the squad forges ahead with the cyclical progress of an organism, at the heart of which James works his magic. He epitomizes the director’s view of armed conflict as an enhanced bodily function, just the way she imagined vampirism in *Near Dark* (1987), her best earlier work. James has the mastery of loose ends and wires down to an intuitive expertise — direct, meticulous and meaningful in its detachment from the war’s wide-ranging absurdities. (The superior who pays him inflated compliments on his track record of 873 disarmed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) appears straight out of *Catch-22* or *Dr. Strangelove*.) Like Bigelow’s night breed, he has made a nonsensical state of being his own by functioning fully within

the belly of the beast, and Renner’s splendid performance infuses his laconic, steely poise with undertones of tender resignation.

James recalls the insulated, philosophical disposition of the character played by Sean Penn in *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), which is telling given the intimations of Malick’s vision — as well as Alexander Sokurov’s — in the style of *The Hurt Locker*. The filmmakers’ microcosmic focus on military deployment through the vagaries of a specialized unit spurns any mode of strategic rationalization — command chains, rules of engagement, fragmentary orders — that depersonalizes the ad hoc prowess of the individual soldier. Bigelow has wisely refrained from the impossible project of an antiwar movie and instead made a radical, political, eminently cinematic film that goes out on a limb to resist the stake of media capitalism in the business of war.

Against the amplification of mayhem, more often than not tantamount to its sanitized digital rendering, she tones and pares the action down to an analytical mode, dilating space and time to situate the war in a no man’s land between stillness and combustion. Detailing motion and depth, the camera refracts the troops’ maneuvers

through an existential prism, as a measure of their surrender to the imperturbable serenity of the environment. This is nowhere more apparent than in the grueling desert shoot-out the squad undertakes against faceless gunmen holed up in a bunker. Duration and distance seem the index of a treacherous ecosystem that pushes their patience, timing and coordination to the limit.

Multiple miscommunications and confused encounters signal the American protagonists’ — as well as the film’s — inevitable anxiety toward the “otherness” of the Iraqis. Distinctions between friend and foe, or between patronizing liberal sympathies and rampant racial hatred, hold no candle to the impossible humanity of armed conflict. A moment of truth shows the three main players literally fading from view as they embark on a nocturnal recon venture. For several long seconds, the empty black screen evokes the war’s heart of darkness as vanishing point, and captures how the negative space of any combat narrative eclipses the sorry sum of its parts — an inherent inadequacy *The Hurt Locker* dramatizes quite impressively.

—KENNETH CRAB

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Diana Block, a former member of the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, returned to public life in 1994 after nine years living on the lam. Her often-poetic memoir, *Arm the Spirit*, vividly captures the agonies and periodic ecstasies of hiding in plain sight, from cutting off ties with family members and friends to raising her two children.

In June 1985, Block, her two-week-old son, Tony, and five other members of Prairie Fire, an offshoot of the Weather Underground, found a surveillance device in their car. At the time they were living in Los Angeles.

Faced with the possibility of arrest due to their involvement in aiding members of the Puerto Rican independence movement, they decided they needed to move underground.

A month earlier, Block’s partner Claude Marks and an activist named Donna had purchased explosives for several *independistas*. Unfortunately for them, the suppliers turned out to be FBI informants.

While Block never discusses the efficacy of this caper, she focuses much of the book on the frenetic aftermath of having to leave everything and everybody behind. When her father died, for example, she didn’t learn about his passing until a year after the fact. Similarly, when friends married, divorced, had children or became ill, she was removed, unable to be

a friend or confidante.

Though Block was forced to sever connections with family and friends, she, Marks and Tony made new lives for themselves, using false IDs. At one point, she took a creative writing class; at another she joined a group of activists in demanding better healthcare for people living with HIV and AIDS.

Still, Block never let her guard down, and she eloquently depicts the pressure of continually looking over her shoulder. When Marks and Donna were featured on *America’s Most Wanted*, her fears of detection escalated. Her panic diminished when she realized that the police photos looked nothing like the pair’s disguised personas.

Block’s writing is especially poignant as she charts the push-and-pull of sub rosa parenting, and her chronicle of trying to get pregnant a second time is heart-rending. Although she gave birth to a daughter in 1991, her account of an earlier miscarriage brings the reality of underground life into sharp focus.

Likewise, once Tony entered school, the situation became increasingly fraught. “What kind of family keeps news of its ancestors under a veil of security?” Block wondered when her son was assigned to draw a family tree for class and Block, worried about blowing their cover, told her son that his grandparents were dead. The strain and constant pressure of concealing their real identities, and raising two children

## Coming Up For Air

*Arm the Spirit: A Woman’s Journey Underground and Back*  
By DIANA BLOCK  
AK PRESS, 2009

in such an environment, began to take a toll on Block, who along with Marks, started to reassess their long-term plan. Together with their comrades-in-hiding, they began to explore ways to re-emerge.

Once they discovered that the government was only interested in prosecuting Marks and Donna, hard-fought negotiations resulted in Marks serving slightly less than four years, and Donna two years, in prison. While imprisonment was predictably rough, returning above ground was also challenging. Nine years is a long time, and Block discovered that her friends “had all evolved and aged in one way or another. Some owned houses, many had professional jobs, most had settled into families.”

Unsettling as it was to renew old acquaintances, Block acknowledges that she received enormous support in re-establishing herself. She now edits *The Fire Inside*, the newsletter of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners, and is a freelance writer. Marks runs The Freedom Archives, a San Francisco radical media center. The two have been together for 25 years.

*Arm the Spirit* blurs the line between political tract, personal odyssey and love story. Although it never critiques either Prairie Fire or the use of violence, its gripping portrayal of one feminist activist is both inspiring and sobering.

—ELEANOR BADER

## reader comments

*Continued from Page 2*  
*Responses to “Bacon as a Weapon of Mass Destruction,” July 24:*

This is right on. I did my thesis on disordered eating and my conclusion was that society was creating the addiction to (highly processed) food. The corporate food system is a really evil empire.

—SANDRA GARDNER

*Response to “Revelation Revolution: A Review of Mark Rudd’s Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen,” July 24:*

If you check out on microfilm all the antiwar underground newspapers that were published in U.S. campus towns and many cities between May 1970 and May 1977, you’ll find that the Weatherpeople were regarded as countercultural folk heroes during this historical era ... which is somewhat different than what’s now being presented in the *Underground*.

—BOBF

*Responses to “Man in the Mirror: Michael Jackson,” July 24:*

This is probably the best article I’ve

read about Michael Jackson, and I agree that rather than gossiping about him, we need to learn from what happened to Michael over the years and, more importantly, why it happened.

—CALLY

*Response to “Chained in Childbirth,” July 24:*

I’m horrified and sickened by the fact that this nation is so uncivilized as to even uphold the practice of shackled childbirth.

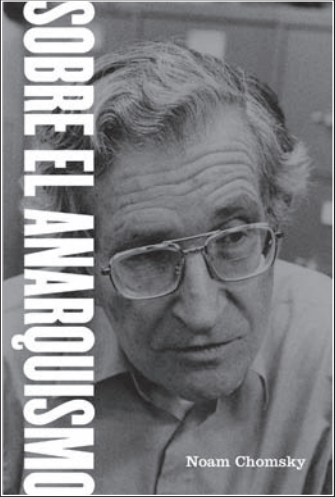
—GERI SILVA

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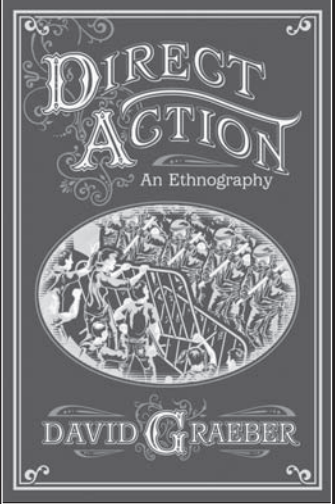


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# DID WOODSTOCK KILL ROCK ‘N’ ROLL?

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

On Thursday, Aug. 14, 1969, two distinct groups packed the bus from New York City to Monticello, N.Y. The people in the back were going to the Woodstock rock festival; the ones in front were bound for the Borscht Belt. One elderly woman turned to me and my two friends and asked, in a Brooklyn-Jewish accent almost as thick as my grandmother’s, “What is this, a hippie convention?”

I was 14. (Yes, I had permissive parents.) It was an epiphany of cultural validation. The three of us had been too rebellious to fit in with the smart kids in our Long Island junior high, too soft and cerebral for the tough kids, and against the Vietnam war in a seriously polarized America. The 1960s have been mythified as a time of peace and love, but in much of the nation, long hair and antiwar attitudes were often an invitation to a gay-bashing even if you were cast of the purest hetero vanilla.

Now we realized we weren’t alone in the world. There were 400,000 of us, sharing smoke, food and orange juice according to the principle of “from each according to their abilities; to each, take a hit and pass it.”

The music was great too. Richie Havens wailing “freedom” while flailing his acoustic guitar; Santana’s fusion of Afro-Cuban drumming and acid-blues guitar; Creedence Clearwater Revival’s concise, choogling swamp-rock tunes; Sly and the Family Stone exhorting “I want to take you higher” over crackling electric funk; and Jimi Hendrix’s cosmic blues, bringing up the sun over the debris of Monday morning.

I’m not into Woodstock nostalgia, however. It’s kind of hard to be when most of the era’s best-known songs have been licensed to shill for credit cards and SUVs. Corporate America saw those 400,000 people too — and it realized that the “counterculture” was a viable mass market. The festival was also a landmark on the path to the resegregation of rock ‘n’ roll and popular music.

## MARKETING MAYHEM

The Top 40 radio of the mid-1960s was rigidly commercial, but gloriously catholic. On a good night, you could hear Aretha Franklin, the Beatles and Johnny Cash back-to-back. The low cost of recording and manufacturing 45-rpm singles gave independent record companies a chance, and a good reaction

on local radio could win unknown artists national hits. In June 1967, Atlantic Records, then a New York-based indie label, had 18 records in the Billboard Top 100, including Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.” Virtually all 1960s soul and R&B records came out on indie labels, most notably Motown and Stax-Volt, as did the early releases by the Rolling Stones (on London) and the Doors (Elektra).

The emergence of FM radio around 1967 created an alternative, for both good and bad. It gave musicians and DJs more freedom; a place for songs that weren’t three-minute current hit singles, that were too long, too odd or too political for Top 40. FM free-form radio DJs might play Cream next to Robert Johnson (the 1930s blues singer who wrote “Crossroads”), the Beatles next to a Ravi Shankar raga. On the other hand, this new freedom was essentially a white niche market. You wouldn’t hear James Brown.

The evolution from singles to albums meant that record labels needed a lot more capital, especially for studio and packaging costs. That made it harder for indie labels to break through, and the newly discovered mass market enticed corporate takeovers. Within a few years of Woodstock, Warner Brothers would acquire Atlantic and Elektra. Within a decade, six corporations would control more than 80 percent of record sales. Since then, mergers have reduced that number to four.

As rock audiences got bigger, sports-arena shows superseded the hippie ballroom-theatre circuit. The Fillmore West in San Francisco and the Fillmore East on the Lower East Side closed in 1971; the Grande Ballroom in Detroit shut down in 1972. These weren’t grassroots collectives by any means, but they were strongly connected to local musicians and scenes, hiring local artists to do their now-legendary psychedelic posters. (The current “Fillmore” clubs in New York and Miami Beach are owned by radio/concert oligopoly Clear Channel, which bought the rights to the brand name.)

Free-form FM radio succumbed too. Radio marketing consultants targeted the 15-to-24 white-male demographic, imposing playlists and severely narrowing the definition of “rock.” The new format was called AOR, “Album-Oriented Rock.” By the late 1970s, people bitterly joked that it stood for “Apartheid-Oriented Radio.”

## SLICING THE MUSIC

Rock ‘n’ roll’s emergence in the early 1950s broke racial barriers. This wasn’t just about white youths discovering Afro-American music, or white musicians imitating blues and soul (though there was plenty of that, and some was embarrassing). It flowed more than one way.

White musicians played in the Stax-Volt and Motown studio ensembles, and even in James Brown’s band. Some of the deepest soul records ever, by Aretha Franklin, Irma Thomas and Wilson Pickett, were cut at the Muscle Shoals studio in Alabama, with a band of white Southerners that occasionally featured Duane Allman on guitar. Black musicians embracing psychedelia included Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton’s Funkadelic, the Chambers Brothers, and future Miles Davis guitarist Pete Cosey. Santana and Malo (with Jorge Santana, Carlos’ brother) emerged from the thriving Latino-rock scene in San Francisco’s Mission District.

Soul artists also translated counterculture concepts into their own style. Sam Cooke said he wrote his 1964 civil-rights anthem “A Change Is Gonna Come” after hearing Bob Dylan’s spiritual-protest song “Blowin’ in the Wind.” The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper* concept album at least partially begat Marvin Gaye’s 1971 masterpiece, *What’s Going On?* Their “Eleanor Rigby” inspired a 21-year-old Jamaican singer-songwriter, who was then illegally working the night shift in a Delaware car factory under the half-pseudonym “Donald Marley.”

By 1969, however, several trends were resegregating music. The Top 40 radio audience was splintering into niche markets. The integrationist dream of the civil-rights movement was collapsing after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Most insidious was the counterculture’s definition of “rock.” By rejecting the danceability and songcraft of three-minute singles as “commercial,” it essentially rejected soul music.

Woodstock’s booking reflected this. Yes, people remember Richie Havens opening the festival and Jimi Hendrix closing it, Sly Stone as a high point and Santana as the best new band — but of the 32 acts on the bill, those four were the only ones fronted by black or Latino performers. (A few more, including Janis Joplin, had black sidemen.) Sly, as far as I can remember, was also the only band at Woodstock in which women



S.M. VIDAURRI

played instruments other than acoustic guitar.

It’s conceivable that soul acts such as the Temptations or James Brown might not have wanted to play in a muddy field with uncertain prospects of getting paid. But two years before, Otis Redding had been one of the stars of the Monterey Pop Festival.

## MISSING THE BLUES

Another gross omission was that for all the hippie veneration of the blues, the closest Woodstock got was Chicago blues-rock singer Paul Butterfield. This wasn’t because the originals weren’t available. Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf, the two titans of Mississippi-to-Chicago blues, were still phenomenal performers even though they were both pushing 60. John Lee Hooker was about to record with Canned Heat, who were on the bill. B.B. King was a regular on the Fillmore circuit, as were talented lesser-knowns like Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton, who’d done the originals of “Hound Dog” and Janis Joplin’s signature song, “Ball and Chain”; James Cotton, who’d played harmonica with both Muddy and the Wolf; and Albert King, a stinging soul-blues guitarist who’d influenced Eric Clapton almost to the point of plagiarism. Any one of them would have gone over well, and they all definitely could have used the exposure.

These trends advanced through the 1970s. By 1983, music genres were so segregated that CBS Re-

cords had to threaten to boycott MTV before it would air Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” video. It wasn’t “rock,” network executives said, despite the Eddie Van Halen guitar solo.

The deregulation of radio ownership in 1996 enabled mega-mass media corporations such as Clear Channel to gobble up hundreds of local stations, accelerating the tyranny of music formats as narrow and homogeneous as fast-food menus. Current popular music is a multitude of niche markets. If hip-hop is self-consciously black, often to the point of caricaturing ghetto realness, indie rock is insularly and nerdily white.

This has much more to do with marketing than with people’s ethnic tastes. Heavy metal is often considered one of the whitest genres there is, but there are thousands of Latino *metalleros* banging their *cabezas* in Queens, Buenos Aires and Guatemala City. My greatest musical pleasure this summer has been another outdoor festival: Celebrate Brooklyn in Prospect Park, where for a \$3 donation, funky, multiracial crowds have turned out for the Venezuelan funk-rock band Los Amigos Invisibles, reggae veteran Burning Spear and the Sufi-bhangra-rock mashup of Bollywood singer Kailash Kher.

So let it be with Woodstock. As the 1950s comedian Lord Buckley put it, “The bad jazz that a cat blows, wails long after he’s cut out. The groovy is often stashed with their frames.”



# Professing Dissent

*Unrepentant Radical Educator: The Writings of John Gerassi*  
EDITED BY TONY MONCHINSKI  
SENSE PUBLISHERS, 2009

A student writer in *The Knight News* declared, “Queens College Professor Teaches Hate.” The headline of the *New York Post* blared, “Put Prof at Head of Crass.”

In 2006, John “Tito” Gerassi’s tradition of encouraging his students to question the status quo finally caught up with him.

Well, not “finally.” After all, he had already been blacklisted from academia for “inciting civil insurrection” among the students at San Francisco State when they occupied the school in 1966. Unable to work in the United States, Gerassi taught at the University of Paris while earning his Ph.D at the London School of Economics, writing his dissertation on Latin American politics. In 1974, when the teacher’s union finally won his case, his rights as an American educator were reinstated and Gerassi returned to the States.

Regarding this most recent attack — initiated by an angry student after the professor declared he was “pro-Palestinian” on the first day of class — Gerassi writes, “Ever since I denounced JFK’s invasion ... of Vietnam, I have been smeared by bigots, America-firsters, racists and just plain idiots.”

Now a tenured professor, Gerassi has taught political science at Queens College, a City University of New York (CUNY) campus, since 1978, when he resigned from his part-time honorarium at Bard College to focus on the “real work” at Queens. Gerassi says he choose

CUNY because he wanted to teach the reactionary, working-class students who “never read, they all worked ... all they wanted was to get their degree to get a better job” rather than Bard’s already-converted “flaming lefties that were going to bring Marxism to America.”

As editor of *Unrepentant Radical Educator*, Tony Monchinski introduces us to the professor who sparked his own emerging analytic inquiry and appreciation for struggle when he was a freshman at CUNY 20 years ago. Via selected writings and interviews, he leads readers through Gerassi’s uncommonly inspiring life.

Born in France as Jean-Paul Sartre’s “non-godson,” he was also the son of Fernando Gerassi, a painter who had volunteered to fight against Franco’s forces in Spain before the family fled France during World War II, using forged diplomatic passports. Gerassi discovered his writing skills and political identity as an undergraduate at Columbia University striking in solidarity with the maintenance staff before working as an editor for *Time*, *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*.

*Unrepentant Radical Educator* melds personal narratives from Gerassi’s days of journalism and activism, featuring Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Jerry Rubin, Eldridge Cleaver and others of the era, with more scholarly essays on figures such as Sartre, Camus, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, of whom Gerassi says, “if they were guilty, they were this planet’s greatest heroes.” Especially fascinating are the tales of deliberate misreporting by the major media outlets for which he worked, epitomized by the words of owner Henry Luce when Gerassi was hired: “We here at *Time* believe that objectivity is neither feasible nor desirable.”

“I trust no one more than Gerassi to make me understand America,” Sartre said. In multiple essays, Gerassi leads us to con-

front the liberal corporatism upon which the U.S. empire is built, which makes all human rights and needs subservient to capitalist aims. It is a hard lesson to imagine in a Queens College classroom. True democracy, Gerassi repeatedly reminds us, means “everyone must have access to the same medical treatment and the same educational advantages. Without good health there is no ‘life.’ Without equal education, there is no choice, hence no Liberty. So how can we pursue happiness?”

Although occasionally repetitive and plagued with the minor typos and formatting errors too often characteristic of the lower-budget writings of the left, *Unrepentant Radical Educator* is an engaging, enjoyable and provocative read offering a well-rounded look at Gerassi. Pieces in the book range from “An Open Letter to Europeans” that urges Europeans to resist American global domination and “The Ideal Syllabus,” which details the curriculum of an international relations course, to “The Cell,” an original one-act play, performed in 1967, about Cuban prisoners awaiting execution. The familiar details interjected by Monchinski — such as when the “older, short balding guy in jeans and a plaid button-down shirt swaggered into class, probably a maintenance man” — add a revealing personal dimension uncommon in such academically affiliated texts.

At 78 years old, Gerassi’s earnest commitment to a better world is especially compelling shared through the lens of enthusiasm with which he continues to view his life and career.

—SOOZY DUNCAN

*Revolution Books is hosting a book release party with John “Tito” Gerassi on Thursday, Sept. 3 at 7 p.m. 146 West 26th Street. revolutionbooksnyc.org.*



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